Approximating the World: Women, 'Civilisation' and Colonial Melbourne

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Commenting upon the developmental paradox of that most 'marvellous' of colonial cities, Francis Adams, perhaps Australia's first cultural critic of any note, wrote that late-nineteenth century Melbourne was characterised both by its 'fine public buildings and tendency towards banality', and 'its hideous houses and tendency towards anarchy' (*Australian Essays* 6). The colonial condition as Adams saw it was simultaneously imitative and iconoclastic, perpetually oscillating between the banal reproduction of English culture and an anarchic disregard for those same cultural norms.

Like many of those who opposed imperial federation and who deplored the subsuming of colonial difference beneath a blanketing geographical and cultural Anglocentrism, Adams viewed colonial society as a vast cultural experiment which had the potential to generate hybrid social forms through which the most corrupt and decadent aspects of English society might be reformed. There were others, of course, who, horrified by the randomness of Australia's social origins and development, saw 'banality' as the only possible antidote to this unregulated social evolution. In aspiring towards these various avatars of English 'civilisation', colonial social engineers recognized both the discursive value of the Victorian metropolitan ideal and its regulatory function. Because of its rapid material progress and evolutionary trajectory, colonial Melbourne became a contested space within which the first Australian 'culture wars' took place as competing ideologies battled over the meanings and architecture of a colonial 'civilisation.'

In this essay I want to examine Ada Cambridge's novel, *The Three Miss Kings*, first serialized in 1883, in order to understand the way in which Cambridge approaches the problem of colonial 'civilisation' and the importance she places upon the role of the colonial city in the reproduction of a hierarchical English social order. In this text, Melbourne is first represented as something of a social labyrinth through which the heroines have great difficulty in making their way. Only with the advent of the 1880 International Exhibition, when it becomes, temporarily, the focus of empire, an alternative imperial centre, does the city start to become comprehensible to the King sisters. In this way, Cambridge articulates her concerns about the place of the middle-class woman within the dangerously democratic social structure of colonial Melbourne. Her fiction proposes a solution to this quandary by designating the imperially-regulated colonial city as the only

possible space in which her middle-class heroines can achieve individuation and perpetuate the values of a civilised culture.

W. R. Lethaby, a late-Victorian designer and architect, wrote that 'a civilized life cannot be lived in undisciplined towns . . . The civic arts are the arts of civilization, and the arts of civilization are civilization itself' (Briggs 32). Lethaby makes an explicit link between civic and social organization and their relationship of mutual constitution. He also implies that one of the functions of the city is disciplinary, the production and perpetuation of cultural and social structures. As Edward Soja and others have pointed out, 'the spatial concentration of power for social reproduction was what the first cities were primarily for' (235). The function of colonial cities, then, would have been twofold. Not only were they, as Jane Jacobs has noted, 'centres for colonial administration, sites of local production and consumption, and conduits for the flow of goods and services' (19), but also physical frameworks within which could be reproduced the ideological and social structures by which the parent culture maintained its hegemony. It is through interaction with 'coded' physical spaces, Rob Shields has suggested, that 'people learn the comportment associated with their gender' and come to 'know their place in society', since 'ideologies and cosmologies are reproduced through this training of bodies as well as through the tutoring of outlook via images of community, nation and world' (192).

By the 1880s, the economic and social catalysts of the gold rushes and land booms had produced in Melbourne a peculiarly colonial culture and society that was related to, but not merely identical with, that of the English original. Anxious to overlay at least a veneer of 'civilisation' upon their somewhat sordid economic foundations, Melbourne's *arriviste* middle-classes set about reproducing a colonial replica of imperial culture in a way which was itself an expression of the tensions between traditional forms of British social organization and the emergence of new organic structures which reflected Australia's own specific social ideals and circumstances.

Cambridge's novel is in many regards a detailed map of this process, albeit one that cannot help betraying its own anxieties about colonial social anarchy and which unashamedly advocates the superiority of the more hierarchical and subtly distinguishable social values and codes of the English class system. One of the ways in which Victorian imperial ideology reinforced the values of capitalism-as-civilisation was through the mounting of massive exhibitions of cultural and commercial goods, new inventions, and industrial machinery and methods. The Melbourne International Exhibition of 1880 was designed first of all to validate Melbourne's claims to an international standard of industrial progress and secondly to demonstrate its mastery of the 'arts of civilisation.' And while also, as Graeme Davison notes, an expression of national identity, it served to reconfirm Australia's relationship to imperial England. For example, the cantata with which the exhibition was launched borrowed the title of Charles Dilke's popular text of imperial federation to hymn Australia's brilliant future as 'a greater Britain, 'neath these Southern Skies' (Davison, 'Festivals'165).

It is this element of colonial exhibition culture that proves most useful to Cambridge. The exhibition forms the background to her novel, not simply in the sense that it provides colour, but in the way in which it comes to operate as the central engine of the narrative. Faced with having to make their way alone in the world, Cambridge's 'newly-orphaned' heroines first consider heading straight for Europe where 'everything would be to our hand – everything would be possible' (2). Commonsense and economic pragmatism wins out, however, and they settle upon Melbourne with its impending exhibition as 'a preparation for England and Germany and Italy' (7). The implication is clear. The exhibition's function is to 'approximate' the 'real' world of European culture, to transform Melbourne, if only temporarily, from colonial outpost to imperial nexus where everything is 'to hand' and 'everything is possible'. In the process, of course, it is to fortify the structures and values of European cultural and social standards that are under threat from the encroachments of colonial cultural and social anarchy.

If Cambridge saw the exhibition as an antidote to the aberrations and amorphousness of colonial society, she also recognized that it posed a threat to the very social order it promised to prop up. The opening ceremony of the 1880 exhibition attracted 20,000 people to Spring St and its environs – almost a tenth of the city's entire population. While the aims of these kinds of displays were articulated in terms of a benevolent paternalism: 'imparting information to the juvenile population,' 'elevating public taste,' and bringing together with one common object, people of all ranks and classes' (Briggs 305), in Europe at least, the amassing of such large bodies of people in the one place also generated real fears about class insurrection. As Andrew Miller points out, the great International Exhibitions of the late-nineteenth century were focal points for anxieties about internal and external threats to public order. The 'heterogeneous mob gathered from all parts of the world' would be swelled by disgruntled workers and streetsellers and between them would foment sedition and class revolution (70–84). In Cambridge's Melbourne, however, the threat is inverted. It is the *lack* of class distinctions that is the problem. Rather than aspiring to the positions of their betters, the colonial 'mob' threatens to drag the heroines down to its own level.

The three King sisters are, at the beginning of the novel, parentless but also without any knowledge of their genealogy or true social standing. They are, as Cambridge puts it, 'utterly without belongings' (3), familial, social or material. What they do have, however, as 'the product of several generations of healthy and cultured people' (3) are the unmistakable hallmarks of 'good breeding', as well as a few relics of their mother's former wealth and social standing in the form of fine laces and pearls. It is these attributes which allow them to negotiate their passage into society as they journey from the extra-social space of an unnamed seaside settlement to the imperial microcosm of Melbourne.

But while the colonial city offers their only access to the cultural and social ideal of Europe, the girls soon discover it is also a dangerous and disorienting place for the middle-class woman without familial connections and masculine protection. Not only must they learn to safely negotiate the physical map of Mel-

bourne, they must become familiar with the invisible social map whose signposts are not always legible. Their only guide is Paul Brion, a young journalist, who is himself no great navigator primarily because his poverty and profession do not allow him access to all social strata. His attempts at introducing the girls into Melbourne society are almost disastrous. For while he is immediately able to recognise their own 'innate' claims to social position, he is at first unable to distinguish between the pretensions of the nouveau-riche Melburnians and those of genuine social worth.

Cambridge makes this point rather heavy-handedly through the character of Mrs Aarons, a woman with 'no pretensions to hereditary distinction' but with knowledge of 'the social equivalent for money obtainable by good management in a community that must necessarily make a table of precedence for itself' (47). It is interesting, but not surprising (Marcus Clarke, in the 1870s remarked upon the prevalence of this trope in romance narratives), that Cambridge should identify the source of the social-climbing Mrs Aarons' wealth with Jewishness. Her point is, perhaps, that the 'long-nosed and narrow-eyed and dark' Aarons offspring will never be able to erase the racial taint from their genealogical history no matter how much wealth their father, the 'astute speculator,' amasses (119). And when Paul Brion asks Mrs Aarons to invite the King sisters into her circle, she betrays the condition of her own entrée into colonial society when she questions Paul's description of the girls as 'born ladies': 'I don't ask what they were born', she counters, 'What are they *now*?' (49).

It is through the opportunistic Mrs Aarons, however, that the sisters do find an adept social guide. Mrs Duff-Scott, 'a lady who possessed not only that most essential and valuable qualification of a lady, riches, but had also a history that was an open page to all men' (60), immediately recognizes the girls' superior breeding and becomes both their patron and surrogate mother. As a result of this lady's attentions the King sisters are given access to the colonial equivalent of European high society in which wealth alone is not sufficient to guarantee a place. She takes it upon herself 'to protect these ingenuous maidens from their own ignorance' (95) and, as their chaperone, escorts them to the most elite events in the Melbourne social calendar; balls, the Melbourne Cup and, of course, the Exhibition.

Mrs Duff-Scott explicitly represents the Exhibition to her protegées as a substitute for European travel and experience. In his histories of the Melbourne world fairs, Graeme Davison notes that the spatial organization of the displays would indeed have given spectators the illusion of 'the experiences of foreign travel as they passed from one national exhibit, or court, to the other' (*Australians 1888*24). As Mrs Duff-Scott tells her charges: 'You have never had such a chance to learn something of the world . . . make a school of the Exhibition while it lasts, and let me give you lessons in – a – what shall I call it – social science? – the study of human nature?' (96). And while the Exhibition overtly represents 'the whole world concentrated in a mere point in space'(Miller 55), it also, in Cambridge's formulation, becomes an extended spatial metaphor of the way in which colonial social space might be regulated and standardized to the conventions of Anglo-European

society. The 'social sciences' in which the girls are to be instructed consist of lessons in social comportment and class differentiation, the kinds of knowledges that are essential to young women whose gentility is threatened by a society that values only the anarchy of newly acquired wealth or the banality of second-hand English social structures. Again and again, the novel enacts a scenario of social disorientation and the literal subsumption of these unattached females into 'the common herd' or crowd.

The first example of this occurs aboard the steamer during their passage to Melbourne. The girls' reaction to their 'first contact with the world' is one of fear and revulsion, and they opt to sleep on deck rather than descend into the 'suffocating hole' of the cabin with its 'rough jostling and impure atmosphere' and the 'loud women' who are their fellow passengers (24). When they reach the city itself, their inability to discern the socio-spatial divisions of class, gender and ethnicity places them in even further danger. While they 'know the points of the compass' and have been given 'general directions' (36) in order to find their way around, they must still rely on the explicitly masculine protection of Paul Brion to avoid both those spaces and social situations which are dangerous to women of as-yet-indeterminate class. As Paul warns the girls when they refuse his offer to guide them home after they become disoriented by the crowds in Collins Street: 'There are a good many paths, and they don't all lead to Myrtle St'; i.e. to the safe and genteel surroundings of East Melbourne (36).

It is the exhibition's crystallization of a capitalistic culture of display and its designation and reinforcement of the city as a 'space of exchange' (Miller 52), that emphasizes the anomalous relationship between women and public space. The only 'safe' way for a middle-class woman to appear in public was in the company of the visible signifiers of social position: family, husband or men. While she was still an object of display, these signifiers acted like the glass cases in the exhibition halls and newly-established department stores, increasing visual desirability while ensuring that the goods were not manhandled before purchase. Lacking these markers of ownership or belonging, Cambridge's heroines are both sexually and socially vulnerable. When the King sisters announce that they intend to 'mingle with the common herd' (78) to watch the opening ceremonies of the Melbourne Exhibition, the foreboding of their single male protector is justified. The girls, however, refuse Paul Brion's escort and set off alone 'blissfully ignorant of the nature of their undertaking' (79). When the youngest sister becomes ill through 'imprudent exposure' (80), Paul is once again available to take her and Patty home, but Elizabeth, the eldest, is left to the vagaries of the crowd on the Treasury steps.

Cambridge's crowd is a Darwinian maelstrom with a determination that only 'the fittest should survive in the fight for existence' (82). Class delineations become blurred amongst closely-packed bodies and Cambridge seems to be suggesting that the breakdown of social classifications leads inevitably to an anarchic pre-civilized state. Elizabeth herself is threatened with an almost literal consumption by this less-than-human throng as, 'bruised and sick with the buffetings' she sustains, she falls 'headlong into the seething mass beneath her' (83). It is in this

section of the novel, at the point where the heroine's claims to individuation and social differentiation seem to have failed utterly, that the regulatory function of the exhibition asserts itself. Elizabeth is rescued by the as-yet-unidentified Kingscote Yelverton, a wealthy English gentleman philanthropist, who, in the best tradition of colonial romance, will not only end up marrying Elizabeth, but is also revealed to be her cousin. Elizabeth's descent into the social formlessness of the crowd is a temporary purgatory from which she emerges with an exalted social position, inherited wealth and a flawless genealogy. Her disorientation is overcome, her state of not being at home in the city is resolved through her assumption of the domestic role and space of wife and mother at the novel's close.

Not only, therefore, does the exhibition provide the means of re-establishing the genealogical links between England and Australia, it also succeeds in allaying the threat, not so much of class insurrection, as happened with the European exhibitions, but of colonial class equalisation. Miller argues that the culture of display invites passivity rather than action. The specularisation and commodification of goods is actually an antidote to civil unrest because 'the orderliness of the objects' themselves is 'infectious and overwhelming', is in fact a means of managing class desire (81–83). Cambridge herself affirms this when she has Kingscote, an expert on crowds, reassure Elizabeth that the mass which nearly engulfed her is 'tame', 'not wanting anything' (86).

Kingscote and everything he stands for teaches the sisters their proper relationship to the crowd, so that the instance of their individuation from the 'common herd' is precisely that moment when the girls realise their European inheritance, financial and familial. One way of reading this text is to see it as rewriting Australian social origins. The girls' father, the first Kingscote Yelverton, convinced he has murdered his own brother, flees to Australia with his wife who was the cause of the brothers' falling out. The history of convictism and transportation becomes a narrative of familial discord, accidental crimes and self-exile, a series of misunderstandings which can be erased by the inter-national intermarriage of the next generation. The function of the colonial city in this rewriting is vital – it is only through its ability to replicate European social space that the familial and genealogical chains between England and her colony can be reforged. The colonial's tendencies towards anarchy are arrested by the internationalism of the Exhibition and its approximation of the more sharply delineated social spaces of England and Europe. And the middle-class colonial woman retains her central role as custodian of universal cultural values and the 'arts of civilisation'.

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